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JOINT ADVANCED WARFIGHTING SCHOOL



**TO ARM OR NOT TO ARM: THE CASE AGAINST ARMING  
VIETNAM AND THE PHILIPPINES**

**by**

**David W. Dengler**

**Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force**

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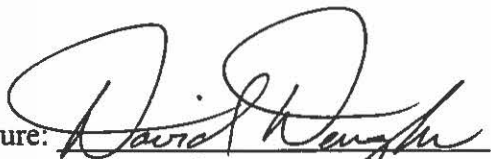
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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Joint Advanced Warfighting School in partial satisfaction of the requirements of a Master of Science Degree in Joint Campaign Planning and Strategy. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Joint Forces Staff College or the Department of Defense.

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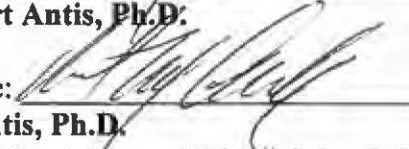
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## **Abstract**

As one manifestation of the tense U.S.-China relationship, the South China Sea represents an area where conflicting interests between China and the United States and its regional partners create the key ingredients for a regional conflict. Dozens of incidents at sea occur annually that raise the risk that a minor event may escalate into armed conflict. The lack of a diplomatic resolution to the territorial disputes, and the growing perception of Chinese assertiveness have encouraged the Obama administration to initiate stronger efforts to balance and deter Chinese power by equipping Vietnam and the Philippines with defensive weapons. To date, the public debate on this policy within the national security community lacks sufficient intellectual depth to evaluate its wisdom. By analyzing the pros and cons, one can better comprehend the implications of this decision. Despite the perceived benefits, this policy decision is more likely to reinforce Chinese fears of American efforts to contain China, and fails to fully appreciate the strategic environment: the increasingly antagonistic U.S.-Sino rhetoric, Chinese motives for asserting influence in the South China Sea, Chinese strategic culture, and the importance of other strategic issues. As an alternative, the United States should exercise strategic restraint and seek to avoid arming regional partners in the South China Sea as a vehicle to pursue diplomatic resolution of the current territorial disputes, decrease overall tensions, and improve the strategic U.S.-Sino relationship.

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## **Introduction**

The U.S.-China relationship arguably presents America's greatest foreign policy challenge in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Enormous uncertainty exists about each nation's intentions; will the United States seek to contain China, or will China use its growing military capability to establish regional hegemony? In this light, the South China Sea serves as a possible flashpoint where overlapping claims to rock outcrops and resource rich waters by seven countries—China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Taiwan, and Brunei—create the key ingredients for a regional conflict with major geopolitical consequences.<sup>1</sup> While the small atolls have little intrinsic value, the region possesses symbolic and strategic value as the key to maritime trade, natural resources, and security. The United States proclaims a neutral stance, but it does have interests at stake along with a key regional ally, the Philippines. Every year, dozens of incidents at sea occur between Chinese vessels and those of the United States or regional countries. This heightens tensions and raises the risk that a minor incident escalates into hostilities.

The United States has pursued several policy options to resolve these disputes peacefully: dialogue, bilateral and multi-lateral engagements, stronger economic ties, and building the capacity of regional militaries among others. Of late, the lack of a diplomatic resolution and the growing perception of Chinese assertiveness have encouraged the Obama administration and regional analysts to consider stronger efforts

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<sup>1</sup> Vietnam and the Philippines hold the most expansive claims, they have the largest number of incidents with China by far, and they have taken the boldest and most visible stance to protect their claims. For those reasons, this thesis on the pros and cons of arming these two nations. In contrast, the claims held by Malaysia, Brunei and Indonesia remain relatively modest, and to date, incidents between China and their security forces occur infrequently at best. Finally, Taiwan and China's claims mirror each other. Aaron W. Steffens, "Scramble in the South China Sea Regional Conflict and U.S. Strategy," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* (Fall 2013): 98-99.

to equip partners with defense articles.<sup>2</sup> In fact, the United States relaxed elements of the non-lethal embargo on Vietnam in 2007, and further reduced lethal arms restrictions in October 2014 to permit sales to Vietnam.<sup>3</sup>

However, to date the public debate within the foreign policy community on this subject lacks sufficient intellectual depth of analysis. Experts suggesting the United States should arm regional partners often provide it as “recommendation” without analyzing the benefits, consequences, or risks of such a decision. Presumably they tie such statements to deterrence—the idea that strong partners will thwart Chinese aggression by raising the costs of war, and potentially enable negotiations to settle the disputes. Will China see the threat and remain deterred, or will it respond in kind? Could American attempts to stabilize the situation by balancing regional actors against China only fuel mistrust and trigger a full arms race leading to greater instability?

On the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of WWI, the South China Sea offers an inviting area for comparison to the causes of that war. A complex interplay of factors led to WWI: alliances, perceptions of power, arms races, fear of being out-mobilized, nationalism, and

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<sup>2</sup> U.S. Code, Title 22, Section 2403 defines Defense Articles as “1) Any weapon, weapons system, munition, aircraft, vessel, boat or other implement of war; 2) any property, installation, commodity, material, equipment, supply, or goods used for the purposes of furnishing military assistance; 3) any machinery, facility, tool, material supply, or other item necessary for the manufacture, production, processing repair, servicing, storage, construction, transportation, operation, or use of any article listed in this subsection; or 4) any component or part of any article listed in this subsection.” These are distinguished from Defense Services such as training, technical expertise, repair, etc. This thesis will focus on Defense Articles in the air, naval, and land domains for both military and law enforcement (i.e. Coast Guard) capabilities; regardless of whether as part of Foreign Military Sales (FMS) or those deemed Excess Defense Articles (i.e. decommissioned, or moth-balled equipment). U.S. policy uses this terminology, but national security authors frequently use the terms lethal and non-lethal arms. For the purposes of this thesis, lethal arms is defined as kinetic weapons and their associated platforms. These pose the greatest threat, they serve as the most likely capability that would escalate a small incident into a full conflict, and they provide the necessary forces needed to secure each state’s claims. Foreign Relations and Intercourse, U.S. Code 22, § 2403, <http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?req=%28title:22%20section:2403%20edition:prelim%29%20OR%20%28granuleid:USC-prelim-title22-section2403%29&f=treesort&edition=prelim&num=0&jumpTo=true> (accessed Feb 18, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Paul J. Leaf, “Time to End Ban on Weapons Sales to Vietnam,” *The Diplomat*, September 18, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/time-to-end-ban-on-weapons-sales-to-vietnam/> (accessed Oct 24, 2014).

national pride among others. Although not all of these elements exist in this region today, some parallels certainly exist: American and Chinese power balancing efforts, the degree of fervor and prestige involved, and potential flashpoints. Hostilities are not a given, but they could happen if actors fail to take deliberate steps concerning their actions and intentions. If not, tactical level misunderstandings could escalate—the 21<sup>st</sup> Century equivalent of Archduke Franz Ferdinand’s assassination.

The South China Sea represents just one area that has strained U.S.-Sino relations; getting this relationship right may prevent an armed conflict that will harm both nations. Efforts to develop a permanent solution in this region may build cooperation and trust, and offer solutions to resolve other strategic issues with China. In order to initiate the first step to find off ramps before escalation begins, America should reconsider the value of equipping Vietnam and the Philippines with lethal arms. As subsequent analysis will show, the deterrent value gained will be modest, while the disadvantages—negative perceptions that will result in China, and the incongruence with the strategic environment—will further complicate efforts to resolve these territorial disputes peacefully, and increase the risk of a security dilemma between all parties.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, the United States should exercise strategic restraint and not provide lethal arms to Vietnam and the Philippines in exchange for active Chinese participation in a diplomatic process to resolve the territorial disputes within five years.

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<sup>4</sup> A “security dilemma” exists when one nation’s military actions (arms purchases, force modernization, basing, or employment concepts) undercut the very security they were designed to enhance. In such a situation, arms purchases, even if intended for defensive purposes only, are perceived by neighbors as threatening. Neighboring nations may respond with their own “defensive” military actions to overcome this insecurity and restore the balance. If not checked, the action-reaction cycle can lead to a destabilizing arms race. Richard A. Bitzinger, “A New Arms Race? Explaining Recent Southeast Asian Military Acquisitions,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 32 (2010), 65.

## **Chapter II - Strategic Context**

### **Interests**

To grasp the unfolding South China Sea events, one must understand the sources of tension including the claims and interests of the nations involved, and the maritime incidents that have occurred in recent decades. This sea covers 3.5 million square kilometers, an area roughly one third of the continental United States.<sup>1</sup> A large number of uninhabited small islands, rocks, and shoals lie within those waters, but as an example, the Spratly Islands cover less than three square miles (See Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Within this region, China claims “indisputable sovereignty over the islands in the South China Sea and the adjacent waters and enjoys sovereign rights and jurisdiction over the relevant waters as well as the seabed and subsoil thereof.”<sup>3</sup> In many cases, Chinese claims extend into the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) of other states, often hundreds of miles closer to these states than to China. China also seeks to restrict access by foreign military vessels in these waters in violation of international law.<sup>4</sup> The major territorial claims include:

- Paracel Islands: occupied by China since 1974, but disputed by Vietnam
- Scarborough Shoal: disputed by China, Taiwan, and the Philippines
- Spratly Islands: disputed by all parties except Indonesia; of the 30,000 features, ~50 are occupied—China: 6; Vietnam: 29; Malaysia: 5; Philippines: 9 Taiwan: 1; Brunei: claims EEZ only<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> World Geography, “South China Sea,” <http://world-geography.org/sea/625-south-china-sea.html> (accessed Jan 25, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA), “South China Sea,” <http://www.eia.gov/countries/regions-topics.cfm?fips=SCS> (accessed Oct 26, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> To date, China has not officially characterized the South China Sea to a “core interest” like Tibet or Taiwan. U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2014,” [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014\\_DoD\\_China\\_Report.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/2014_DoD_China_Report.pdf) (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 21.

<sup>4</sup> Typically, such disputes between nations are resolved peacefully with a 50/50 middle line chosen when EEZs overlap. However, in this case, most of China’s claims to the South China Sea extend well beyond its 200nm EEZ limits. U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, U.S.-China Economic & Security Review Commission, Capt Stacy A. Pedrozo, *China’s Active Defense Strategy and its Regional Impact*, 112th Cong., 1st sess., 5.

<sup>5</sup> David Lai, “Asia-Pacific: A Strategic Assessment,” Strategic Studies Institute, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1155> (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 61-62; Patrick M.

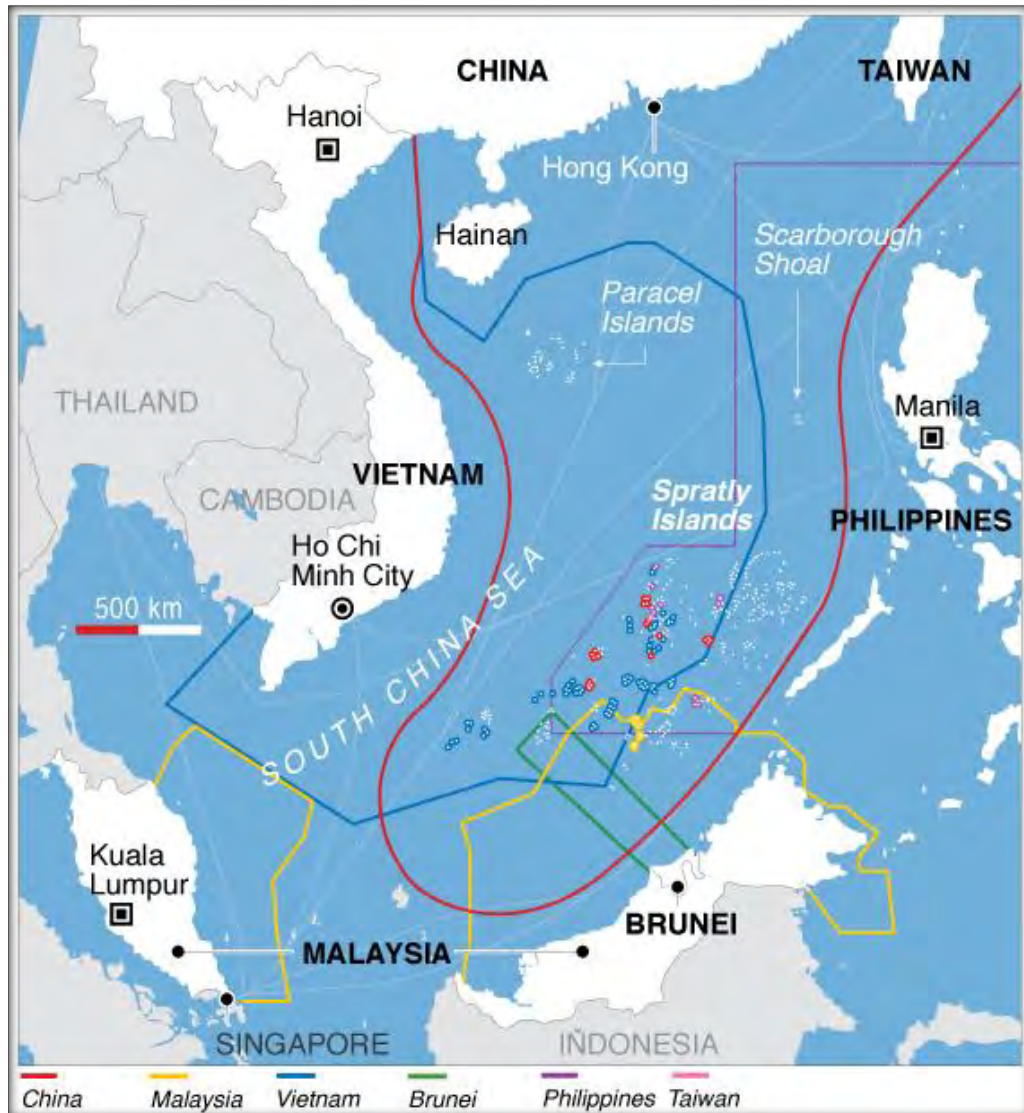


Figure 1. South China Sea Claims<sup>6</sup>

These overlapping claims of sovereignty, often times within other nations' EEZs, cause the greatest source of tension. China, Vietnam, and the Philippines have stoked intense nationalism to raise public awareness and build support for actions to enforce their claims. In many cases, these passions take the form of protests and calls for tough

Cronin, ed., "Cooperation from Strength: The United States, China and the South China Sea," Center for New American Security, [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_CooperationFromStrength\\_Cronin\\_1.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_CooperationFromStrength_Cronin_1.pdf) (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 34.

<sup>6</sup> Voice of America, "Is China Overplaying Its Hand in the South China Sea?" Jul 27, 2012, <http://blogs.voanews.com/state-department-news/2012/07/27/is-china-overplaying-its-hand-in-the-south-china-sea/> (accessed Oct 26, 2014).

stances that put pressure on political leaders not to compromise. As the only geographically separated state, the United States lacks claims to the South China Sea, and maintains neutrality in the disputes, even concerning the Philippines' claims.

Beyond sovereignty, all four nations maintain multiple interests in the region, from sea lines of communication and natural resources to maritime security. China's leaders need a strong economy and high employment to ensure internal stability and to preserve the one party political system. The maritime domain underpins China's economy by providing access to raw materials, and a path to foreign markets for finished products. An estimated "\$5.3 trillion dollars of waterborne trade (half of the global total by gross tonnage and one-third by monetary value)" travels through the South China Sea every year with roughly "\$1.2 trillion belonging to the United States."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, "In 2011, 15.2 million [barrels] of oil per day transited the Malacca Straits, just 10 percent less than the Strait of Hormuz."<sup>8</sup> In 2013, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines imported approximately 5.7 million, 60,000, and 300,000 barrels of oil per day respectively.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, the South China Sea represents a major thoroughfare, and China's share certainly overshadows its rivals. This region's significance will only grow in the future given oil's importance. By 2035, Asia will consume an estimated 90 percent of the energy produced by the Middle East and North Africa; presumably, China will dominate this demand.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Steffens, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. EIA, "China," <http://www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=CH>, (accessed Oct 26, 2014); U.S. EIA, "Vietnam," <http://www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=VM>, (accessed Oct 26, 2014); U.S. EIA, "Philippines," <http://www.eia.gov/countries/country-data.cfm?fips=RP>, (accessed Oct 26, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Will Rogers, "Finding Common Ground: Energy, Security and Cooperation in the South China Sea," Center for New American Security, <http://www.cnas.org/content/bulletin-9-finding-common-ground-energy-security-and-cooperation-south-china-sea> (accessed Sept 3, 2014), 3.



The region is also a source of resources, both energy and fish. Estimates vary greatly based on the source, but the region may hold as little as 11 billion, or as much as 125 billion barrels of oil, a so-called “second Persian Gulf.”<sup>11</sup> China is also the world’s largest consumer and exporter of fish, and nearly 70 percent of Southeast Asia’s 593 million people reside near the coast and eat fish from these waters.<sup>12</sup> Experts assess these waters account for one tenth of the global fishing catch, although over-fishing has stressed those stocks to near collapse.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, the regions’ nations view the South China Sea as critical to their security. Whereas the Philippines and Vietnam currently view the waters in terms of basic maritime and coastal security against non-state and regional threats, China’s great-power stature leads it to view the neighboring seas as critical to its national security against a range of regional and global threats. This stems from centuries of history, but particularly the last 175 years. Within that period, China faced economic exploitation from European and Japanese powers—what Chinese term the “Century of Humiliation.”

Since then, China witnessed America’s ability to strangle resource dependent Japan during WWII, the decisive U.S.-led coalition victory over Iraq in 1991, and the United States’ use of two aircraft carriers to deter Chinese coercion of Taiwan in 1996. Finally, the United States maintains eight military bases and three alliances within the first and second island chains.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Chinese leaders pursued a Mahanian approach in

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<sup>11</sup> Rogers, 3; Estimates vary greatly due to the lack of thorough surveys. Test drilling in some areas of the South China Sea prevents more accurate assessments.

<sup>12</sup> Steffens, 90.

<sup>13</sup> Cronin, “Cooperation from Strength,” 55; Steffens, 90.

<sup>14</sup> The first island chain consists of Borneo, the Philippines, Taiwan, Okinawa, and the southern Japanese islands. The second island chain stretches from New Guinea, to Guam, and the Japanese main island. Matthew R. Costlow, “Gunboat Diplomacy in the South China Sea,” United States Air Force Academy, Institute for National Security Studies, <http://oai.dtic.mil/oai/oai?verb=getRecord&metadataPrefix=html&identifier=ADA578075> (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 19; U.S. Congress, 2.

the mid-1990s to modernize its navy and secure the maritime near abroad to gain access to the open ocean and to provide maritime defense in depth rather than defend itself at the shoreline. Those decisions 20 years ago gained added support when the United States made the “Pacific Pivot” in 2011—a policy China naturally linked to containment.

From China’s perspective, influence over the South China Seas provides the added benefit of securing the sea lanes needed to access resources and markets. In fact, Robert Kaplan argues China needs the South China Sea to exert influence into the Indian Ocean, and to the first and second island chains. Indications suggest China wants access to overseas ports—sometimes referred to as the “string of pearls”—to facilitate its security in the Indian Ocean.<sup>15</sup> In light of China’s fixation on maintaining a strong economy, the desire to strengthen its influence over the sea lanes makes sense. This situation is no different from America’s own desire to protect sea lanes to its key resources and markets, the Persian Gulf being one. The obvious difference becomes whether China pursues simple influence or control.

United States’ interests center on two themes: international order and freedom of navigation. Conflict prevention remains a centerpiece of American foreign policy to preserve the international order, avoid human suffering and financial disruptions, and prevent escalation. The United States fears that if China successfully uses force in the South China Sea, it may similarly act against Taiwan or the East China Sea. Moreover, if a just peace fails to emerge, the likelihood of a follow-on conflict grows. Next, freedom of navigation serves as a key element of global free trade and the overall American economy, especially given the volume and value of trade in these waters. China’s desire

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<sup>15</sup> China has shown particular interest in having facilities in Myanmar, Timor-Leste, and Pakistan. U.S. Congress, 4.

to restrict military vessels from its EEZs conflicts with the majority of world interpretations.<sup>16</sup> According to one expert, “The PRC has more aggressively and consistently enforced such restrictions in its claims than any other state.”<sup>17</sup>

### Strategies

China has employed a variety of instruments of power—diplomacy, information, economic, and military—to protect its interests, to assert its sovereignty claims, and to deter other states. Moreover, the military serves as just one component as illustrated in China’s Three Warfares Concept.<sup>18</sup> Disintegration Warfare uses “politics, economy, culture, military threats, conspiracy, media propaganda, law, information and intelligence.”<sup>19</sup> Next, Unrestricted Warfare defined as “using all means, including armed force or non-armed force, military and non-military, and lethal and non-lethal means to compel the enemy to accept one’s interests.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, Intelligence Warfare seeks to gain insight on adversary capabilities and intentions. Collectively, this strategic framework provides China a multi-faceted approach to achieve its ends.

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<sup>16</sup> Of the 161 nations that have ratified the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) treaty, only China and 13 other nations stipulate EEZ restrictions for foreign military vessels. Lai, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Bouchat, “Dangerous Ground: The Spratly Islands and U.S. Interests and Approaches,” Strategic Studies Institute, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?pubID=1187> (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 71.

<sup>18</sup> The 2011 Department of Defense Annual Report to Congress on China provides an alternative definition of the Three Warfares Concept. I chose Fumio Ota’s given its currency with evolving Chinese doctrine and access to sources not available in 2011. The DoD report describes the following: “Psychological Warfare seeks to undermine an enemy’s ability to conduct combat operations through operations aimed at deterring, shocking, and demoralizing enemy military personnel and supporting civilian populations. Media Warfare is aimed at influencing domestic and international public opinion to build support for China’s military actions and dissuade an adversary from pursuing actions contrary to China’s interests. Legal Warfare uses international and domestic law to claim the legal high ground or assert Chinese interests. It can be employed to hamstring an adversary’s operational freedom and shape the operational space. Legal warfare is also intended to build international support and manage possible political repercussions of China’s military actions. China has attempted to employ legal warfare in the maritime domain and in international airspace in pursuit of a security buffer zone.” U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2011,” [http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011\\_CMPR\\_Final.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/2011_CMPR_Final.pdf) (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 26.

<sup>19</sup> Fumio Ota, “Sun Tzu in Contemporary Chinese Strategy,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 2 (2014), 78.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 79.

Diplomatically and politically, China has largely avoided multilateral efforts to resolve this dispute. In fact, China often tries to influence the agenda of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) fora to avoid discussion of the dispute. Chinese diplomats prefer bilateral meetings where China holds greater power over its neighbors; thereby avoiding nations “ganging up” on it. This divide and conquer tactic has worked well in support of Chinese efforts to elude concessions. Next, China has built outposts on atolls and created administrative jurisdictions to enforce their claims on the basis of possession. In June 2012 for example, China elevated Sansha jurisdiction on Woody Island from a county to a prefectural-level city (a regional level descriptor that includes multiple counties) to give it greater symbolic importance.<sup>21</sup> Finally, diplomats attempt to reassure neighbors that China does not have hegemonic intentions to allay their fears and to minimize U.S. participation in the disputes. However, China’s actions often undercut that assertion leaving most states skeptical, while inducing greater U.S. involvement.

China enables diplomacy through its information and economic power. In the information sphere, political and military leaders, academics, policy makers, and the public at large regularly discuss how the government should respond to the latest incidents with other nations, both immediately and in the future. While this often rallies the population behind the government, the public’s awareness creates a dilemma where the government fears “appearing weak or inactive in the face of such strong public sentiment.”<sup>22</sup> Economically, China maintains extensive trade with Vietnam and the

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<sup>21</sup> Dr. Michael D. Swaine, “Congressional Testimony: China’s Maritime Disputes in the East and South China Seas,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Michael\\_Swaine\\_-\\_Testimony.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/Michael_Swaine_-_Testimony.pdf) (accessed Sep 3, 2014), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 2

Philippines; becoming the largest and third largest trading partner respectively.<sup>23</sup> This provides an important advantage when these states do not conform to Chinese desires. When Vietnam pursued offshore oil exploration in 2008, China warned Exxon- Mobil executives that continued activities would put the company's interests in China at risk.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, China has granted oil exploration rights to companies to drill to exert its jurisdiction.<sup>25</sup> In 2012, China suspended banana imports from the Philippines—a substantial part of its export market—when tensions increased over Scarborough Shoal.<sup>26</sup>

Militarily, China significantly overmatches the Philippines and Vietnam, and even the United States to a degree given its global commitments. China seeks to avoid armed conflict and minimizes its military's direct role with a few hundred troops garrisoning the islands it holds.<sup>27</sup> Coast Guard and fishing vessels provide China's primary day-to-day enforcement capability. These often-termed paramilitary forces provide a government-sanctioned element (white hulls) to enforce jurisdiction, yet they remain under the threshold of naval combatants (gray hulls). However, military forces linger just over the horizon should states attempt to escalate situations or enforce control of their claims.

Strategic patience underpins these levers as China gradually conditions regional states to its claims by continually establishing new norms. Experts have termed this approach everything from tailored coercion, coercive diplomacy, and "Finlandization," to

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<sup>23</sup> Steffens, 97; Maria Ortuoste, "The Philippines in the South China Sea: Out of Time, Out of Options?" *Southeast Asian Affairs*. (2013) <http://search.proquest.com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/docview/1508526198?accountid=12686> (accessed Dec 10, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> Cronin, "Cooperation from Strength," 36.

<sup>25</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro, "The Sansha Garrison: China's Deliberate Escalation in the South China Sea," Center for New American Security, [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_ESCA\\_bulletin5.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_ESCA_bulletin5.pdf) (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Euan Graham, "Southeast Asia in the U.S. Rebalance: Perceptions from a Divided Region," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 35 (2013), 309.

<sup>27</sup> Bouchat, 10.

incrementalism, salami slicing, or a cabbage strategy.<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the euphemism, China's delaying strategy uses pressure to gradually assert influence over the region. By enforcing jurisdiction—boarding fishing vessels, confiscating catches, and forcing unsanctioned oil survey vessels to leave—fisherman and multinational companies are less likely to return over time. A 2011 article highlighted this issue, “many Vietnamese fishermen stayed in port rather than confront the Chinese,” after China imposed its annual fishing ban north of 12 degrees north latitude.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, when the Philippines miscalculated and sent a Navy ship to Scarborough Reef in March 2012, China seized the opportunity to surround the area with maritime enforcement ships, worked to isolate the Philippines in regional forums, and suspended banana imports.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, the Filipino units withdrew, and China has maintained a permanent presence there ever since.<sup>31</sup>

As China gauges international reaction, it moderates its actions to ease tensions.<sup>32</sup> New provocations will restart the previous tactics if a favorable strategic setting exists, but always staying short of armed conflict. Fortunately, “military power and naval forces have played a secondary role, as this competition over maritime rights has not yet become militarized.”<sup>33</sup> The wide range of military and non-military capabilities gives

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<sup>28</sup> Each of these terms has slightly different meanings, but ultimately they arrive at much the same result. China achieves its goals in the South China Sea without regional conflict, and U.S. influence in the region is hindered. If U.S. partners and allies turn toward China as a result, such a situation is all the better. Patrick M. Cronin, Dr. Ely Ratner, Elbridge Colby, Zachary M. Hosford, and Alexander Sullivan, “Tailored Coercion Competition and Risk in Maritime Asia,” Center for New American Security, [http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS\\_TailoredCoercion\\_report.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_TailoredCoercion_report.pdf) (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 5-6, 22; Cronin, “Cooperation from Strength,” 7.

<sup>29</sup> Carlyle A. Thayer, “The Tyranny of Geography: Vietnamese Strategies to Constrain China in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33 (2011), 358-359.

<sup>30</sup> International Crisis Group, “Stirring up the South China Sea (II): Regional Responses,” <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/asia/north-east-asia/china/229-stirring-up-the-south-china-sea-ii-regional-responses.aspx> (accessed Aug 23, 2014), 19, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Cronin, “Tailored Coercion,” 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> M. Taylor Fravel’s “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” provides a thorough breakdown of this oscillating strategy up through 2011.

<sup>33</sup> Cronin, “Cooperation from Strength,” 36.

China the ability to demonstrate strong resolve against its weaker neighbors and escalate as needed, which further complicates Filipino and Vietnamese responses.<sup>34</sup> China prefers to use law enforcement capabilities because “their actions are more containable. Given their limited armaments, they are unlikely to escalate skirmishes into significant sea battles and will never engage in a force-on-force clash with navies.”<sup>35</sup> Faced with a non-military force, an aggressive response by Vietnam or the Philippines risks a response from China’s over-the-horizon military capability, and international condemnation.

Coupled with extended diplomacy that produces little outcomes, “the result is a whole of-government approach that seeks to prolong diplomacy to maintain the status quo [i.e. avoiding armed conflict or concessions] while simultaneously consolidating territorial claims and building military and economic power.”<sup>36</sup> This avoids confrontation with the United States, yet still achieves China’s aims. However, neighbors often view China’s actions as bullish, and an impediment to positive relations.

Vietnam and the Philippines similarly leverage the same tools to fulfill their interests and defend their claims. Politically, both nations have pursued regional engagement, and participated in ASEAN, the key international forum, but neither avenue has led to a breakthrough solution. China undermines ASEAN by pressuring nations like Cambodia and Laos that lack interests in the disputes. Similarly, “ASEAN’s consensual style drives distinct emphases on relationship building over coercion and deterrence.”<sup>37</sup> ASEAN members fear that the U.S.-Sino rivalry may force them to pick sides, something

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<sup>34</sup> Swaine, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Christian Le Miere, “Policing the Waves: Maritime Paramilitaries in the Asia-Pacific,” *Survival* 53 (2011), 142.

<sup>36</sup> Steffens, 96.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 97.

they want to avoid given their economic ties with and proximity to China.<sup>38</sup> Given the organization's disunity, it remains unlikely to provide a substantive solution. Beyond ASEAN, the Philippines sought United Nations arbitration of the disputes in January 2013, despite Chinese protests, with results anticipated in 2015.<sup>39</sup> Like China, both nations have administratively exercised their claims through oil exploration and fishing regulations. Finally, both nations leverage the information domain to motivate their people, although these efforts can backfire. In May 2014, hyper-inflamed Vietnamese burned Chinese factories, and those mistakenly thought to be Chinese, when China moved an oil rig 120nm from Vietnam's coast, and 180nm from China's Hainan Island.<sup>40</sup>

Militarily, Vietnam and the Philippines have enhanced their security capacity to deter China, although the Philippines only recently made substantive efforts to enhance their military capabilities. Both nations have also sought ties with external powers—India, South Korea, Japan, and the United States—to balance Chinese power. The Philippines and United States maintain a mutual defense treaty and recently signed an agreement establishing rotational U.S. access to Subic Bay. Similarly, Vietnam opened Cam Ranh Bay to foreign navies and pursued arms purchases from India and the United States. While militarily weaker than China, Vietnam has asserted its claims most forcefully, and has a lengthy history of armed conflict with China over various issues.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Graham, 319.

<sup>39</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress...2014," 3-4.

<sup>40</sup> Keith Johnson, "China's Backdraft," *Foreign Policy*, May 14, 2014, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/05/14/chinas-backdraft/> (accessed Dec 10, 2014); Hilary Whiteman, "How an oil rig sparked anti-China riots in Vietnam," May 19, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/05/19/world/asia/china-vietnam-islands-oil-rig-explainer/> (accessed Feb 5, 2015).

<sup>41</sup> Steffens, 97.



Finally, both nations have deployed forces to garrison the islands they claim including 600 Vietnamese troops, and 500 Filipino Marines to demonstrate their commitment.<sup>42</sup>

In 2011, the United States renewed its East Asia focus, termed the “Rebalance to Asia” or the “Pacific Pivot,” to address its interests. While the military features garnered the greatest attention, they represented only a portion of the policy. Diplomatically, the United States appointed an ambassador to ASEAN, leveraged that organization to emphasize international norms, and initiated several high profile visits.<sup>43</sup> The United States reinforced diplomacy in the information domain by promoting peaceful, multi-lateral dispute resolution. To enhance economic ties, the United States started the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations with 11 other nations (including Vietnam) following the 50 percent drop (20 to 9 percent) in U.S.-ASEAN trade from 1998 to 2010.<sup>44</sup> The United States omitted China—presumably to balance the region’s economic dependence on China, and the TPP’s tough stance on intellectual property protection—and excluded the Philippines due to Filipino restrictions on business ownership by foreigners.<sup>45</sup>

Militarily, the United States pursues a number of mechanisms to reinforce its interests in the region. Force presence—port calls, basing, and freedom of navigation maneuvers—remains the centerpiece of this commitment. For example, navy ships account for “one third of all foreign warship visits into [Singapore’s] Changi Naval Base.”<sup>46</sup> Although military forces in the Pacific theater will increase over time due to the Rebalance to Asia, the actual increase is rather modest (See below and Figure 2):

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<sup>42</sup> Bouchat, 10.

<sup>43</sup> Graham, 307, 309.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 308.

<sup>45</sup> Office of the United States Trade Representative, “Trans Pacific Partnership,” <http://www.ustr.gov/tpp> (accessed Oct 29, 2014).

<sup>46</sup> Graham, 318.

- Increase the number of ships home ported in the Pacific 60% by 2020
- At least six operationally available and sustainable aircraft carriers and 60% of its submarines
- Increase the number of vessels stationed in or forward-deployed to the Pacific from 51 in 2014, to 58 in 2015, and 67 by 2020
- Four Littoral Combat Ships to Singapore by 2017, and seven to Japan by 2022
- Rotational deployments of 2,500 Marines to Australia for six-month durations<sup>47</sup>

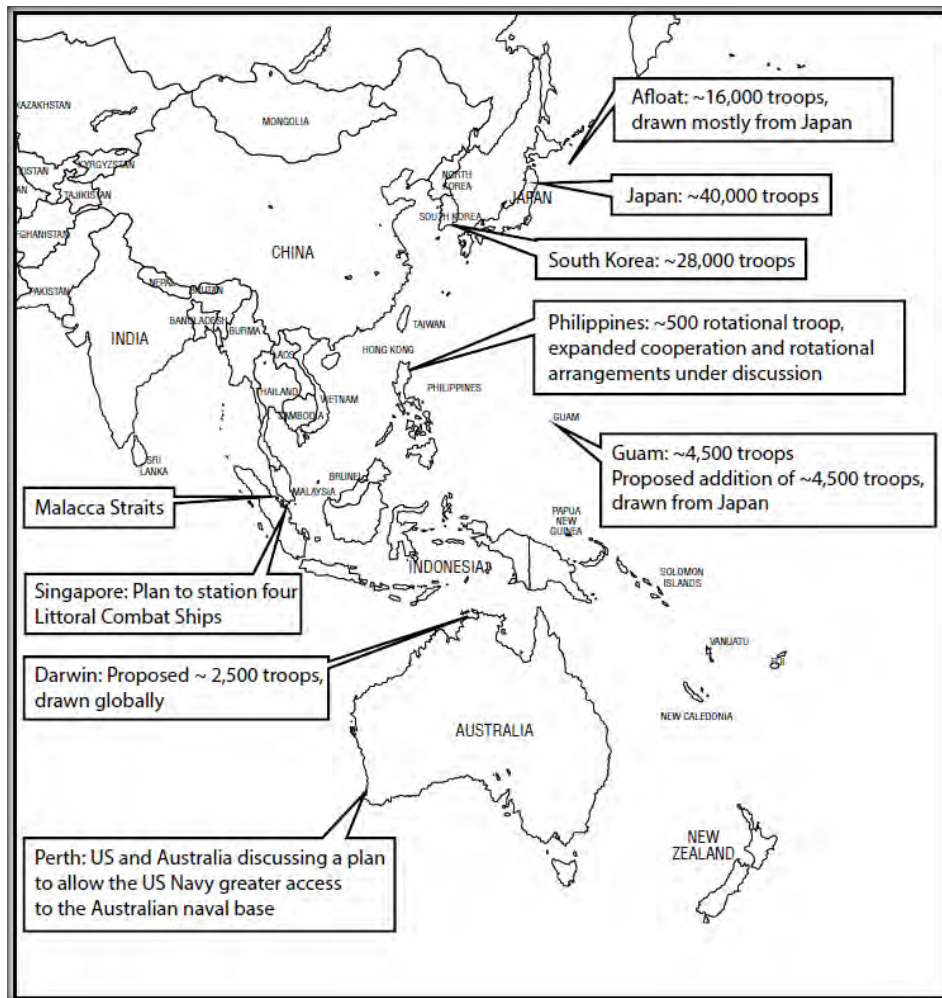


Figure 2. United States Force Restructure to the Pacific Theater<sup>48</sup>

Another key aspect is the U.S.-Filipino Mutual Defense Treaty, but the United States stays vague about the treaty's applicability to the maritime disputes to prevent Filipino

<sup>47</sup> Ronald O'Rourke, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities—Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf> (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 45-46.

<sup>48</sup> Mark E. Manyin et al., "Pivot to the Pacific? The Obama Administration's 'Rebalancing' Toward Asia," CRS Report for Congress R42448 (Washington: CRS, 28 March 2012), 3.

adventurism.<sup>49</sup> In April 2014, both nations renewed this alliance with an agreement that permits a rotational United States presence, and supports Filipino force modernization and training.<sup>50</sup> Finally, the United States seeks to build Filipino and Vietnamese security capacity through training and arms sales. However, training and exercises lack the substance needed to deter China given the focus on search and rescue, counter-piracy, and counterterrorism, while deliberately avoiding capabilities like anti-submarine warfare or joint air and sea strike operations due to the provocative implications they may carry. Despite the renewed Pacific focus, critics find the U.S. strategy differs little from the last 20 years, while others question America's commitment and fiscal resources.<sup>51</sup>

### Militarization

Regional experts disagree about whether an arms race truly exists, but without a doubt, nations in the area have increased military expenditures (even accounting for inflation) to modernize and increase their capabilities.<sup>52</sup> Robert Kaplan calls it the most underreported military buildup in the world, while Richard Bitzinger assessed "militaries have been on a veritable shopping spree over the past decade."<sup>53</sup> To understand militarization properly, one must look beyond budgets and weapon systems, and consider platform basing, key assets' operational reach, warfighting concepts, and the enabling

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<sup>49</sup> Graham, 314.

<sup>50</sup> Albawaba (London) Ltd., "Philippines, United States: U.S. to Sign a Military Agreement with Philippines," Apr 30, 2014, <http://search.proquest.com.nduezproxy.idm.oclc.org/docview/1520058375?accountid=12686> (accessed Sep 21, 2014).

<sup>51</sup> Steffens, 97; Graham, 306-307.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Kaplan's *Asia's Cauldron: The South China Sea and the End of a Stable Pacific* presents a good overview of regional military spending. In addition to Kaplan and Richard Bitzinger, James Steinberg's and Michael O'Hanlon's *Strategic Reassurance and Resolve: U.S.-China Relations in the Twenty-First Century* published in 2014 offers a detailed chapter on military spending by the U.S. and China. In addition to these sources, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute maintains extensive databases on individual country spending. Likewise, the annual Department of Defense report to Congress on the Chinese military offers details on spending and quantities of major weapon systems.

<sup>53</sup> Bitzinger, 52.

capabilities—precision weapons, communication, reconnaissance, and maintenance—to comprehend the qualitative character of the military buildup. These factors can drive over-reaction in an adversary just as readily as the spending and weapon systems themselves; thus, a security dilemma and resulting arms race can begin.

Of particular concern are two emerging warfighting concepts: China's Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) and the U.S. Joint Operational Access Concept and its enabling concept, Air-Sea Battle (ASB). A2/AD is designed to “deter U.S. intervention in a conflict in China's near-seas region,...or failing that, delay the arrival or reduce the effectiveness of intervening U.S. forces” should China decide to conduct offensive operations against Taiwan, or in the East and South China Seas.<sup>54</sup> The concept hinges on layered defenses that can saturate air and surface forces with multi-axis threats that overwhelm defenses—well before the platforms reach the employment range of their weapons. Despite the publicity, A2/AD's effects are most pronounced within a few hundred miles of the shoreline, but “the further from China's territory one looks...the less relevant Beijing's 12 percent per year military budgetary increases are.”<sup>55</sup> The question remains whether China will use A2/AD to project power or to provide a defensive shield.

While U.S. officials deny the explicit link to China, ASB seeks to counter this potential threat to the global commons by compromising the A2/AD targeting kill-chain—sensors, command and control centers, communications, and weapon systems—that link the sensor to shooter.<sup>56</sup> Experts assess the A2/AD kill-chain concept “is

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<sup>54</sup> Anti-access is described as efforts “to prevent military forces or legitimate users from entering an area (“anti-access,” or A2) or operating effectively within an area (“area-denial,” or AD).” O'Rourke, 4, 47.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher P. Twomey, “The Military-Security Relationship,” In *Tangled Titans: The United States and China*, (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), 254.

<sup>56</sup> For a more thorough understanding of ASB, please see “Air-Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access & Area Denial Challenges,” May 2013, <http://www.defense.gov/pubs/ASB-ConceptImplementation-Summary-May-2013.pdf>.

complex, fragile, and vulnerable to physical attacks and cyberattacks,”<sup>57</sup> and ASB seeks to pick it apart. ASB has its critics; some contend it lacks clear linkages with political objectives, its emphasis on attacking targets, potentially preemptively, in mainland China risks escalation, or that it masquerades as a strategy.<sup>58</sup> Others “have charged that the Air-Sea Battle concept is driving China to increase its A2AD capabilities.”<sup>59</sup> These assessments and criticisms heighten the risk that China could perceive a need to strike first before ASB has a chance to expose A2/AD’s shortfalls. Similarly, U.S. leaders might decide to strike first before its assessed capability or positional advantages are lost.

### Incidents

In recent decades, military and non-military forces from these nations have collided in numerous incidents including: demonstrations, harassment, confrontation, and deadly force. Demonstrations involve patrols, shows of force, and training and live-fire exercises. Harassment consists of jurisdiction enforcement without force such as boarding, detainment, and confiscation of fishing catches and vessels. Confrontation includes non-lethal force and marks a more aggressive attempt to enforce jurisdiction through tactics like water cannons, cutting across a ship’s bow, or cutting towed arrays. On two occasions in 2011, Chinese vessels cut the towed arrays of oil exploration ships operating within Vietnam’s EEZ, while on December 5, 2013, a Chinese warship in international waters cut across the bow of the USS *Cowpens* with only 100 yards of separation.<sup>60</sup> Although all sides have refrained from using deadly force recently, when

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<sup>57</sup> O’Rourke, 57.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid, 55-57; James M. Keagle, Richard D. Fisher, Jr., and Brian Johnson, “Enhancing the U.S. Rebalance Toward Asia: Elevating Allies,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 3 (2013), 62.

<sup>59</sup> O’Rourke, 45-46.

<sup>60</sup> Thayer, 359; U.S. Department of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress...2014,” 4.

Chinese and Vietnamese vessels clashed in January 1988, 74 Vietnamese and 18 Chinese sailors died.<sup>61</sup> Today's incidents raise concerns that a minor issue could escalate to this level of violence given the intense nationalism and honor at stake.

Despite the recent lack of deadly incidents, the frequency of lower level provocative measures and uses of non-violent means have increased dramatically. Further complicating the situation, each side perceives its actions as benign and exclusively in response to the provocation of others.<sup>62</sup> A noted expert on China, Dr. Michael Swaine, concluded that while China often reacts to actions by others, it sometimes deliberately escalates to establish new norms in the hopes of deterring further actions by others.<sup>63</sup> Appendix I provides a representative example of these sorts of decisions, actions, and incidents from 2006-2012. China does not shoulder all of the blame since Vietnam and the Philippines have instigated incidents on occasion. This interactive dynamic reinforces the need for deliberate efforts to address the root causes before a minor incident escalates to hostilities.

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<sup>61</sup> Cronin, "Cooperation from Strength," 34; Jane's Information Group, "Surface Tension: Rivals Jostle in South China Sea," *Jane's Navy International* 118 (2013), <http://search.proquest.com.ndueproxy.idm.oclc.org/docview/1328449257?accountid=12686> (accessed Sep 3, 2014).

<sup>62</sup> Swaine, 3.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, 6.

## **Chapter III – Arms Sales to Vietnam and the Philippines**

### **Recent Developments**

The strategic issues vexing American administrations are how to respond to the competing interests and strategies of these states to maintain the status quo and prevent armed conflict. Ironically, one proposal includes arming regional partners with lethal arms to deter China's assertiveness and restore stability. For years, Vietnamese political and military leaders have approached their American counterparts about relaxing the arms embargo the United States imposed in 1984 due to Vietnam's human rights abuses. The Bush administration relaxed some restrictions on non-lethal arms in 2007 as part of expanding the bilateral relationship and enhancing Vietnam's defensive capabilities.<sup>1</sup> In 2014, calls to relax the embargo increased with statements from Senator John McCain, General Martin Dempsey, and Secretary of State John Kerry following increased Sino-Vietnam tensions that summer.<sup>2</sup> As a likely result, the United States agreed to relax portions of the lethal arms embargo on Vietnam in early October 2014.<sup>3</sup>

### **Pros of Selling Lethal Arms**

Selling lethal arms to Vietnam and the Philippines offers several advantages.

First, a natural outgrowth to increased tensions is to prepare militarily to reassure their

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<sup>1</sup> Leaf (accessed Oct 24, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> In May 2014, China moved an oil rig 120nm from Vietnam's coast, supported by a flotilla of over 70 Coast Guard ships, and seven naval warships. Vessels from both nations rammed each other and fired water cannons on several occasions over two months before China withdrew the rig in July. Johnson, "China's Backdraft"; Keith Johnson, "China's Oil Rig Gambit," *Foreign Policy*, May 9, 2014, [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/05/09/chinas\\_oil\\_rig\\_gambit](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/05/09/chinas_oil_rig_gambit) (accessed Dec 10, 2014); Armin Rosen, "China's Escalation in the South China Sea is Unprecedented," *Business Insider India*, <http://www.businessinsider.in/Chinas-Escalation-In-The-South-China-Sea-Is-Unprecedented/articleshow/35174168.cms> (accessed Dec 10, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> The precise details of this agreement remain unclear, but as an example, the U.S. is considering selling P-3 Orion maritime surveillance aircraft. Truong-Minh Vu and Ngo Di Lan, "The Political Significance of American Lethal Weapons to Vietnam," *The Diplomat*, October 7, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/the-political-significance-of-american-lethal-weapons-to-vietnam/> (accessed Oct 24, 2014).

populations of their intent to protect their interests. Both nations could benefit greatly from modernized surveillance capabilities and weapon systems to defend their claims and balance Chinese power. By extension, militarily stronger regional partners expand the number of nations China might confront in an armed conflict. In this vein, policy makers aim to raise the stakes in the cost-benefit equation if China decides to use hostile actions.

American systems also provide the interoperability needed to facilitate exercises and training, and if deterrence fails, could provide the basis for more effective combat operations. In Vietnam's case, this appears to make sense. Vietnam ranks as the world's 15th largest population and 33rd in military spending, while according to Goldman Sachs, it will become the 17th largest economy by 2025.<sup>4</sup> Given these resources, its interests, and the will to defend them, Vietnam is arguably best positioned to counter China outside of a multilateral construct. As for the Philippines, China does not view the Filipino military's limited capabilities as a significant threat. That said, in the context of other regional nations that are modernizing their militaries, China might reconsider its policies lest it create the very conflict and greater U.S. involvement China wants to avoid.

Second, stronger military capabilities will permit both the Philippines and Vietnam to demonstrate their resolve and to negotiate from an improved position. If China assesses that the costs of armed conflict outweigh the benefits, such a condition may lay the groundwork needed for a negotiated settlement—whether bilateral or multilateral. As one expert concluded, “Diplomatic and economic engagement will work better when backed by a credible military posture.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, a Vietnamese ambassador

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<sup>4</sup> The population figures are based on 2014 numbers, and military spending is based on 2012 figures. Central Intelligence Agency, “The World Factbook: Vietnam,” <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/vm.html> (accessed Feb 22, 2015); Leaf (accessed Oct 24, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Cronin, “Cooperation from Strength,” 8.



noted, “If the United States does not show some signs of support for the smaller countries on this issue, Vietnam will have no choice but to accommodate China.”<sup>6</sup>

Next, arming partners demonstrates America’s commitment to the broader Pacific region. Beyond the South China Sea, other partners—Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, Singapore, Taiwan, and India—increasingly worry about Chinese economic and military power, and quietly welcome America’s renewed focus on Asia.<sup>7</sup> This shift also demonstrates that despite U.S. fiscal problems, and the obvious questions about the nation’s monetary resources, the United States possesses the ability to reprioritize to meet changing security dynamics and maintain its strategic credibility in the region. As one component of this broader strategy, one expert contends the region needs efforts like this, otherwise, “Absent significant U.S. and allied investments, deterring China will soon become far more difficult due to its galloping military modernization and buildup.”<sup>8</sup> This expansion could impact the pace or scale of Chinese efforts to assert sovereignty in the region if China views the strategic environment as suitable for military action.

Critics argue that if the United States does not arm these two nations, they will find other sources. Russia, Germany, France, and the United Kingdom consistently top the arms supplier list compiled by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Vietnam’s largest supplier, Russia, poses its own challenges as a dependable supply source. Russia remains susceptible to Chinese pressure if the latter decides Russian weapons—particularly submarines, fighters, and advanced missiles—have altered the balance. Russia also uses arms sales as a source of hard currency; thus, it has limited

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<sup>6</sup> Bouchat, 102.

<sup>7</sup> Cronin, “Cooperation from Strength,” 7.

<sup>8</sup> Keagle, 61.

willingness to accede to price concessions to meet Vietnam's budgetary limitations; something the United States could subsidize.<sup>9</sup> This situation provides the United States an opportunity to build regional influence. Meanwhile, Vietnam is cultivating relationships with India and Japan to leverage their mutual interests. In fact, India extended a \$100 million line of credit in September 2014 to enable arms purchases.<sup>10</sup>

Finally, arming partners provides an opportunity to share the resource burden of balancing China across other nations. Given America's global commitments, this point acknowledges that United States forces cannot be everywhere, thus other nations need to help provide for their own defense.<sup>11</sup> By forcing other nations to have "skin in the game"—politically, financially, and militarily—they have a stake in their own security. Moreover, as the United States faces declining defense budgets, this provides an opportunity to offset those shortfalls using other nations' resources to enhance security.

### Cons of Selling Lethal Arms

While lethal arms offer possible advantages, they also raise concerns. Foremost among these are Chinese perceptions and reactions to the United States arming its two most contentious South China Sea rivals. China professes a deep-seated belief that at its core, the Rebalance to Asia aims to contain China.<sup>12</sup> In fact, it would amaze most Americans to grasp the extent to which China views the United States as a revisionist power intent on curtailing it.<sup>13</sup> China will ignore strategic messaging designed to allay

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<sup>9</sup> Leaf (accessed Oct 24, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> Ankit Panda, "What to Expect if the U.S. Lifts Its Vietnam Arms Embargo," *The Diplomat*, September 29, 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/09/what-to-expect-if-the-us-lifts-its-vietnam-arms-embargo/> (accessed Oct 22, 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Cronin, "Tailored Coercion," 7, 19.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Kaplan and James Steinberg discuss this theme throughout their 2014 books (see bibliography).

<sup>13</sup> Andrew F. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, "How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing's Fear," *Foreign Affairs* 3 (Sep-Oct 2012), 33.

such fears, and will not view these nations as simply arming themselves defensively; it will see the arming of proxy nations as an extension of containment. Moreover, China knows the United States prefers to fight conflicts as a coalition; thus, this network of nations lays the foundation for a future coalition if needed. As described earlier, China already feels surrounded by U.S. military presence and has other strategic threats posed by Japan, Russia, extremist and separatist elements, other South China Sea rivals that are arming, and an India that increasingly appears to lean toward the United States. As such, arming Vietnam and the Philippines will reinforce Chinese containment fears.

With Chinese fears of a U.S.-driven policy of containment “confirmed,” and regional and U.S. concerns growing over China’s rise in power and assertiveness of its claims, such an environment heightens the potential for the classic security dilemma. While critics contend Vietnam and the Philippines will acquire weapons regardless of whether the United States sources them, these same critics fail to understand the perceptions about U.S. weapons that will shape China’s calculus. Most observers perceive U.S. weapons as technologically superior to those from other nations, and China would likely agree. While export controls will limit the depth of capability associated with the weapon systems sold by the United States, their inherent interoperability with U.S. forces multiplies the potential forces with which the United States can integrate during hostilities. Similarly, Vietnam and the Philippines may become increasingly belligerent or adventurist with their new capabilities—even if limited to patrols, escorts, exercises, or live-fire events—something that adds further opportunities for incidents and miscalculation. This could drive China to increase its arsenals to compensate for the qualitative or quantitative advantage the United States and its partners possess. Given the

mobility and operational reach of today's platforms, even a modest expansion of Chinese forces beyond their current numbers risks other nations—namely South Korea, Japan, India, and others in the South China Sea—expanding their militaries in response.

Without a doubt, Asian nations have concerns about China's intentions, and about how they should respond.<sup>14</sup> Many nations have concluded that China's modernization "undertaken for whatever reasons, creates perceptions that China is interested in power projection and not a peaceful rise after all."<sup>15</sup> China has attempted to dispel these fears; however, "despite the Chinese overtures, many other countries and observers perceive the escalation of China's military spending differently."<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, nations view Chinese assertiveness as destabilizing and something that may hinder stability and economic growth.<sup>17</sup> Clearly, China is struggling to maintain the delicate balance between defending its territory while avoiding a negative response from neighboring countries.

While a true arms race may not exist today, the state-level psychological factors appear to exist on all sides. As fears heighten and stances harden, nationalism increases accordingly. Experts have long asserted that China uses nationalism to maintain the Communist party's legitimacy, and that "disputes in the East and South China Seas may also offer China a relief valve for a sputtering economy."<sup>18</sup> Nationalism can become its own life force such that "with every countermove other countries make, the Chinese domestic public will expect its government to respond in kind, showing strength in the

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<sup>14</sup> Sean Chen and John Feffer, "China's Military Spending: Soft Rise or Hard Threat?," *Asian Perspective* 33 (2009), 61.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 65.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 62.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick M. Cronin, "Contested Waters: Managing Disputes in the East and South China Seas," Center for New American Security, <http://www.cnas.org/publications/commentaries/qs-and-as-bulletins-fact-sheets/contested-waters-managing-disputes-in-the-east-and-south-china-seas#.VGDkVE102M8> (accessed Sep 21, 2014), 4.

face of foreign pressure.”<sup>19</sup> This may reduce China’s freedom of action in response to external actors, or force it to ignore rational cost-benefit decisions due to pressures associated with national honor and prestige. Thus, the risk of conflict may increase.

Both Vietnam and the Philippines also face significant challenges in building a credible deterrent. Based on their geographic proximity to China, Vietnam and the Philippines will likely avoid building a threat deemed “too credible” for fear of antagonizing China; China has already demonstrated its willingness to use other instruments of power (diplomatic and economic) against both nations.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, both nations may never reach the point where they achieve real deterrence. Even if they opt to build a credible deterrent, China might act pre-emptively if it concludes its advantage is slipping and the circumstances favor immediate rather than future action.

Both nations lack the revenue to sustain major modernization programs to address the immense qualitative and quantitative disparity between their forces and China. Modern weaponry may provide advantages, but the associated costs will limit the amount of arms either nation can acquire. Even Vietnam’s economy, which is robust by global standards, is dwarfed by China’s, and depends heavily on trade with China. In the case of the Philippines, its weak economic situation and reliance on the U.S. alliance caused it to under resource its military for years. Only recently has the Philippines begun to tackle these shortfalls, but it will need a significant influx of equipment and training to improve its capabilities.<sup>21</sup> One analyst exposed the glaring problem of building the Filipino Navy:

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<sup>19</sup> Mastro, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Cronin, “Cooperation from Strength,” 18.

<sup>21</sup> Following the Scarborough Shoal standoff in 2012, the Philippines passed legislation to modernize the military with \$1.2 billion per year; well short of the estimated \$150 billion per year China spends. Ortuoste (accessed Dec 10, 2014).

[T]he Philippines is virtually defenseless at sea....The reality is that a Philippine defense build-up large enough to enable the Philippines to deter Chinese assertiveness will require a generational military assistance effort on the part of the United States, akin to U.S. efforts with South Korea following the Korean War.<sup>22</sup>

Given the current budgetary situation the United States confronts, the executive and legislative branches are unlikely to have the will to sustain such a level of effort.

Moreover, advanced weapons require not just money, but expertise and enablers to integrate them as part of an effective fighting force. Both nations lack an equivalent A2/AD or ASB concept with which they could integrate this weaponry. Even with U.S. assistance, it remains doubtful whether they can develop the complex doctrine and capabilities needed. The United States has matured these capabilities and personnel through decades of experimentation, training, and actual combat to reach today's level of proficiency, yet still faces tactical level execution problems. Additionally, weapon systems alone cannot function effectively without the supporting command and control, intelligence, and logistics capabilities needed to enable these warfighting elements.

Finally, arming these two countries undermines America's principled positions from two perspectives. First, arming claimants in a dispute philosophically undermines the United States' stated neutral position. China will disregard messaging and conclude that the United States has sided against it. While China has not defined the South China Sea as a "core interest," it holds deep-seated emotions about sovereignty stemming from the Century of Humiliation. As such, any perceptions of the United States picking sides risks elevating this to the level of United States support for Taiwan or Tibet in the

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<sup>22</sup> Michael McDevitt, "The South China Sea: Assessing U.S. Policy and Options for the Future," Center for Naval Analyses, November 2014, <http://www.cna.org/research/2014/south-china-sea> (accessed Feb 4, 2015), 86.

Chinese psyche. China expert Clarence Bouchat noted, “Too much or misapplied U.S. support in the region will not only alienate China, but could also sow discord among the ASEAN states, which runs counter to American intentions for ASEAN unity to balance Chinese power.”<sup>23</sup>

Second, given its human rights record, selling arms to a country like Vietnam is inconsistent with statements made against countries like North Korea, China, and Iran concerning their similar abuses. In the 2014 Freedom House report, Vietnam had similar ratings to those three countries for personal rights and civil liberties, and ranked alongside those nations as “not free.”<sup>24</sup> Once again, choosing to arm a partner with a questionable human rights record would create a double standard in American foreign policy, and once again undermine the broader strategic communications message on basic individual freedoms the nation aims to share throughout the world. The United States has a poor record of ignoring principles and siding with authoritarian regimes in balancing strategies only to learn painful lessons years later when those nations ignore United States interests.

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<sup>23</sup> Bouchat, 103.

<sup>24</sup> Freedom House, “Freedom in the World 2014: The Democratic Leadership Gap,” <https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/FIW%202014%20Scores%20%20Countries%20and%20Territories.pdf> (accessed Nov 24, 2014).

## **Chapter IV – Analysis and Recommendations**

Having examined some of the potential advantages and disadvantages of arming Vietnam and the Philippines, this chapter will explore why the United States should exercise strategic restraint and not arm the Philippines or Vietnam. Not arming these two partners better fits the strategic environment, provides the opportunity to foster strategic trust with China, puts the onus on China to decline an option to deescalate tensions, and exercising this restraint today would still permit future administrations to reverse the policy as required. This recommended foreign policy option is not without challenges, risks, or critics, but when leveraged as a bargaining chip, it furnishes an alternative that may decrease tensions and improve the strategic U.S.-Sino relationship on the South China Sea and other issues.

### **Why Strategic Restraint Should Dominate**

Strategic restraint better fits the strategic environment from several perspectives. First, it helps undermine the Chinese narrative that the United States wants to contain it, and as such leverages a page from Sun Tzu to target China's strategy. The containment theme plays well to China's domestic audience. It galvanizes support for military funding and the government's actions in the region, and diverts attention away from domestic challenges. Selling lethal arms to Vietnam and the Philippines provides another tangible example that fuels that narrative, and thereby reinforces China's position.

Tensions further emerge in the increasingly adversarial rhetoric between the United States and China. As Thucydides cautioned, fear, honor, and anger can lead to irrational decisions with strategic consequences. The militarization of articles in publications and the media reflects phrases like "Chinese aggression," "major buildup,"



“battle of the South China Sea,” “alarming actions,” “dangerous behavior,” “growing rivalry,” “containing China,” and “arms race.” As examples:

An Australian analysis from early 2011, for example, opined: “Governments around the Pacific are preparing for war with China... behind closed doors, [senior strategists] ... are all terrified of China ... not just wary, or suspicious, or hedging their bets ... but existentially terrified.” The Economist’s Banyan columnist observed recently: “China has ... provoked the suspicion of its neighbors. Its ships treat the seas as a Chinese lake.”<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese ‘heartland’ is becoming a platform for large-scale joint force projection to advance Chinese goals of preserving the dictatorship in Pyongyang, containing Japan, suppressing democracy on Taiwan, extending control over the South China Sea, containing India, and gaining growing power over Central Asia.”<sup>2</sup>

Such language reflects the growing passions and nationalism by non-Chinese parties with interests in the region, and risks decision makers adhering to positions out of national honor and pride, or feeling forced to respond by an inflamed public.<sup>3</sup>

Similar rhetoric and emotions exist in Chinese writings as well. In particular, Chinese writers “see Western strategic culture—especially that of the United States—as militaristic, offense-minded, expansionist, and selfish.”<sup>4</sup> One can regularly find articles from military officers and government controlled sources that argue for hardline approaches to perceived affronts. The growing acceptance of foreign policy writings by the public in the last decade has increasingly placed pressure on the government to act

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<sup>1</sup> Lyle Goldstein, “Chinese Naval Strategy in the South China Sea: An Abundance of Noise and Smoke, but Little Fire,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33 (2011), 322.

<sup>2</sup> Keagle, 61.

<sup>3</sup> In a 2014 Pew Research poll, 93 percent of Filipinos and 84 percent of Vietnamese feared China’s territorial ambitions might lead to a conflict. Bruce Stokes, “Keep Your Eye on Beijing,” *Foreign Policy*, Jul 7, 1014 [http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/07/28/keep\\_your\\_eye\\_on\\_beijing\\_china\\_military](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/07/28/keep_your_eye_on_beijing_china_military) (accessed Dec 10, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> Nathan, 35.

more forcefully.<sup>5</sup> China's use of the phrase "indisputable sovereignty" over the South China Sea "drive[s] up the value that both leaders and citizens attach to their political goals."<sup>6</sup> The danger of miscalculation on all sides grows in this environment as nations establish their interest, goals, and redlines, and become less willing to compromise for fear of looking weak before their animated populations.

Despite the rhetoric, no ideology or nation is monolithic, thus opportunities exist to improve the U.S.-Sino relationship. Moderating voices do exist in Chinese writings, even in military literature, that express a cautious tone about antagonizing other nations, and differing opinions about how to address the territorial disputes:<sup>7</sup>

However, there may be influential elements in the Chinese government that see its international role growing and that its current restrictive navigation policy not only sets the PRC at odds with most other states, but also with its own future needs as an emerging world power desiring access to littoral regions around the world. Among its divergent agencies, the argument might prevail that the PRC should rely on its growing navy for defense of its home waters rather than weaker legalistic methods which may later be used against it.<sup>8</sup>

Some authors have recognized the regional "submarine building race" along with China's relative weakness in anti-submarine warfare, while others acknowledge China's regional approach may be eliciting the negative response it wants to avoid.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in 2011 "top leaders...reaffirmed that China's approach to the disputes in the South China Sea should remain based on Deng Xiaoping's guideline of 'sovereignty is ours, set aside disputes,

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Adamson, "China's Response to the US Asia-Pacific 'Rebalance' and Its Implications for Sino-US Relations" (master's thesis, George Washington University, 2013), 37-38, 74-75.

<sup>6</sup> James R. Holmes, "A Competitive Turn: How Increased Chinese Maritime Actions Complicate U.S. Partnerships," Center for a New American Security, [http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS\\_bulletin\\_Holmes\\_ACompetitiveTurn.pdf](http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_bulletin_Holmes_ACompetitiveTurn.pdf) (accessed Dec 10, 2014), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Adamson, 61-63; Goldstein, 328-330, 335; Costlow, 15-16.

<sup>8</sup> Bouchat, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Goldstein, 336.

pursue joint development,”” of the South China Sea’s resources with China’s neighbors.<sup>10</sup> Meanwhile, an expert on China noted, “China has not been as assertive in this dispute as many observers contend.”<sup>11</sup> As described earlier, evidence suggests that China frequently, though not always, reacts to the actions of other nations.

Policy makers on all sides need to leverage these opportunities to deflate fears and change perceptions. Although analysts do not fully understand the level of impact the moderate voices have, influencers and policy makers in China with a more cautious, pragmatic perspective might see value in an arms control arrangement as part of a broader compromise. Even so, the United States would also need to adjust its approach to the problem. Currently the United States has great difficulty separating China’s territorial disputes from its rising power status; policy makers view any actions in the South China Sea as proof of expansionist designs in the region.<sup>12</sup> As evidence, writers will term U.S. Navy trips through the South China Sea as Freedom of Navigation, yet they describe Chinese naval trips as patrols. Ultimately, the natural U.S. reaction to build partner capacity and establish redlines to restrain Chinese behavior only weds U.S. policy to a strategy of deterrence that reinforces Chinese fears. The challenge then becomes convincing passionate populations that compromise serves everyone’s interests.

Second, China’s “strategic culture” plays another key factor. Historically, China has retained a defensive, non-hegemonic posture, but this “predilection for the limited use of force should not be confused with a reluctance to use force at all... [Chinese leaders] see threats everywhere. The full extent of the siege mentality of China’s leaders is not

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<sup>10</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s Strategy in the South China Sea,” *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 33 (2011), 312.

<sup>11</sup> Patrick M. Cronin, “Cooperation from Strength,” 44.

<sup>12</sup> Lai, 10.

always appreciated.”<sup>13</sup> China feels surrounded by major and minor powers—many of which China has fought over territorial disputes and other interests—and increasingly a “never again” attitude has developed with regard to territorial sovereignty. Therefore, China often views external moves as threats,

But widespread perceptions of China as an aggressive, expansionist power are off base. Although China’s relative power has grown significantly in recent decades, the main tasks of Chinese foreign policy are defensive and have not changed much since the Cold War era: to blunt destabilizing influences from abroad, to avoid territorial losses, to reduce its neighbors’ suspicions, and to sustain economic growth.<sup>14</sup>

Military confrontation over the South China Sea weakens China’s assertion of a peaceful rise, and would produce negative economic and international effects, and lead to more forceful regional and U.S. responses. All of these run counter to China’s long-term interests and goals, and their own principles for peaceful coexistence.<sup>15</sup>

Next, the perceived benefit of arming partners may ease short-term political pressure to “do something,” but often these actions create or ignore long-term consequences that undermine broader strategic goals. To use golf parlance, this focus by the United States on the short over the long game poses significant obstacles that compound over time. American foreign policy makers naturally want to confront threats with strength—the hallmark of deterrence strategy. However, the history of arms sales over the last 50 years has demonstrated numerous examples where short-term decisions

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<sup>13</sup> Andrew Scobell, “China and Strategic Culture,” Strategic Studies Institute, May 2002, [http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2002/ssi\\_scobell.pdf](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2002/ssi_scobell.pdf) (accessed Aug 23, 2014), 3, 11.

<sup>14</sup> Nathan, 32.

<sup>15</sup> China has long asserted five principles of peaceful coexistence, “mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual nonaggression, mutual noninterference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.” David C. Gompert and Phillip C. Saunders, “The Paradox of Power: Sino-American Strategic Restraint in an Age of Vulnerability,” Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, <http://inss.dodlive.mil/publications/books/paradox-of-power/> (accessed Aug 23, 2014), 46.

to provide lethal arms created future threats—Iran in the 1970s, and the Afghan Mujahedeen and Iraq during the 1980s. A fundamental tenet of strategy holds:

A fifth premise is that any strategy creates a security dilemma for the strategist and other actors. Any strategy, once known or implemented, introduces change into the strategic environment, even when it seeks to maintain the status quo. Change can occur on multiordered levels and may be nonlinear. Change threatens the existing equilibrium or status quo in the strategic environment, raising the question of whether the results of doing nothing are better or worse than the consequences of doing something...Given the nature of the environment, “how” you seek to accomplish an objective will itself produce interaction within the environment. Part of the complexity is that an inappropriate instrument or a faulty application may well produce undesired second- and third-order effects.<sup>16</sup>

In this case, arming partners will complicate U.S.-Sino relations on strategic issues such as cyber-security, Taiwan, North Korea, Iran, and intellectual property. As one analyst noted, “Hawkish campaign talk about trade wars and strategic competition plays into Beijing’s fears while undercutting the necessary effort to agree on common interests.”<sup>17</sup>

Arming regional partners ignores why China seeks greater influence over its maritime periphery. China’s overriding focus on internal stability drives an equally intense effort to maintain a strong economy, and the sea lanes provide the lifeblood of that economic system. As Robert Kaplan noted in a 2010 lecture:

I think they think very long term. I think they're uncomfortable with the fact that they rely on the U.S....to protect the sea lines of communication for their merchant fleet....Even though it's an international waterway the Chinese see it in Monroe Doctrine terms—it's something that is part of their patrimony. They see the South China Sea the way the U.S. saw the Caribbean when it was expanding its power under President Theodore Roosevelt.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Harry Yarger, “Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy,” Strategic Studies Institute, February 2006, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/> (accessed Nov 25, 2014), 8.

<sup>17</sup> Nathan, 46.

<sup>18</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, “China's Expanding Naval Power” (lecture, Council on Foreign Relations, April 30, 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/china/chinas-expanding-naval-power/p22040>).

Following the example set by the European powers, the United States, and Japan, China is expanding its merchant and naval fleets. Likewise, “throughout history, countries that have built up a sustained great economy over decades have also built up their militaries.”<sup>19</sup> Recognizing China’s right to provide sea lane security and honor its great power responsibility for securing the global commons would provide it a matter of satisfaction, and further challenge the containment narrative.

Beyond the strategic environment, while China’s military modernization may appear menacing, a number of non-military factors provide perspective on this hard power. Some weapons carry a sense of prestige that reflect the power of those states fielding them. Nuclear weapons and aircraft carriers come to the forefront as systems that require a large industrial and economic base to sustain them. Some assets are so exclusive, only those nations described as “Great Powers” can field them in any quantities. In certain respects, China’s military growth reflects the nation’s “coming of age” as it acquires the tangible symbols of other great powers—a strong military. Coupled with its historical legacy, China sees itself as merely exercising what other great powers have done—securing its interests and the ability to negotiate as equals.<sup>20</sup>

Jobs and budgets may provide another non-military explanation for this naval growth. Shipbuilding represents an important component of China’s manufacturing industry, and just as importantly, an easy source of jobs. Naval shipbuilding permits China to keep people employed and simultaneously modernize its military. Furthermore,

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Swartz provides a historical examination of several rising powers that have built strong navies, and the challenges they have posed to existing naval powers of the period. Peter M. Swartz, “Rising Power and Naval Powers,” In *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, 1-21, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/chinese-navy.pdf> (accessed Aug 23, 2014).

all bureaucracies find reasons to justify their existence and expand their allocation of resources, and China's military does the same. The Chinese Navy routinely casts itself as the "protector of China's economy" in its arguments for increased spending.<sup>21</sup> The strong nationalistic feelings over the South China Sea coupled with the narrative of external threats and Chinese history provide a natural springboard for the military to request more resources. Therefore, while outside observers see an expanding military threat, that growth may represent multiple, diverse influences.

Finally, this policy offers a relatively low risk alternative for several reasons. The United States still maintains a regional presence to deter Chinese military aggression and conflict. Next, the deterrent value from Vietnam and the Philippines is modest. Even Vietnam's capabilities will remain quantitatively inferior to China given the substantial economic disparity between the two. Third, the United States retains other options for building partner capacity to include training and exercises that do not involve arms sales. Finally, if the policy fails to achieve the desired ends, any administration can reverse it. Indeed, a policy "failure" could better set conditions for its reversal. If China ignores this overture and continues its current approach, the region and international community will see the truth of China's heavy-handedness, despite Chinese assertions of "peaceful development." In this case, "tactical Chinese victories that garner incremental sovereignty gains are net losers for Beijing in the form of increased isolation and counterbalancing," neither of which meet China's strategic goals.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> M. Taylor Fravel and Alexander Liebman, "Beyond the Moat: The PLAN's Evolving Interests and Potential Influence," In *The Chinese Navy: Expanding Capabilities, Evolving Roles*, 41-80, Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs, Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/Books/chinese-navy.pdf> (accessed Aug 23, 2014), 42.

<sup>22</sup> Zachary M. Hosford and Ely Ratner, "The Challenge of Chinese Revisionism: The Expanding Role of China's Non-Military Maritime Vessels," Center for New American Security, <http://www.cnas.org/files/>

As an alternative, restraint on arming partners offers a valuable item to resolve the region's disputes. Given the potential of an arms race or an incident escalating to armed conflict, this option could provide the first step toward arms control or a disarmament plan to help avoid either possibility. Policy makers must recognize that often the key to effective negotiations is taking the first step by overcoming the appearance of weakness and appeasement. Among other options, the United States could pursue any combination of the following with China in exchange for not arming Vietnam and the Philippines:

- Request China pursue a multi-lateral approach with an aim to resolve in five years
- Request Chinese written guarantees to permit all nations Freedom of Navigation in its EEZ in accordance with the United Nations Treaty
- Request Chinese willingness to jointly develop the South China Sea's resources<sup>23</sup>
- Offer informal recognition of the region as within the Chinese area of influence vice sovereign control
- Offer a security guarantee not to change or undermine China's ruling party
- Offer to open the Trans-Pacific Partnership economic negotiations to China
- Offer to export oil from U.S. production to fulfill China's growing energy needs

Assuming it will compromise, China needs an "honorable out" to satisfy its public.

Interestingly, a United States initiated concession might provide the impetus needed for such a solution to occur by furnishing tacit recognition of China's great power status since the United States generally only negotiates arms control agreements with peers.

While beyond this thesis' scope, China is capable of resolving territorial disputes peacefully; China has solved eleven land disputes with six of its neighbors since 1998.<sup>24</sup> China also compromised in the maritime domain as well, having resolved its Gulf of

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[documents/flashpoints/CNAS\\_Bulletin\\_HosfordRatner\\_ChineseRevisionism.pdf](#) (accessed Aug 23, 2014), 6.

<sup>23</sup> At least some Chinese "are not yet ready to abandon Deng Xiaoping's 1978 dictum shelving sovereignty disputes in favor of joint development," which demonstrates the willingness of some Chinese to avoid confrontation and seek peaceful accommodation on the disputes. Costlow, 13.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, "Annual Report to Congress...2014," 21.



Tonkin disputes with Vietnam in 2000.<sup>25</sup> As M. Taylor Fravel noted, “Although China has participated in more territorial disputes than any other state since the end of World War II, it has settled the majority of these conflicts through bilateral agreements, usually by compromising over the sovereignty of contested land.”<sup>26</sup> While the South China Sea holds greater strategic and emotional importance, the precedent exists nonetheless.

Admittedly, this policy recommendation does not lack critics. Chinese leaders might view such a decision as weakness and a further sign of American appeasement of China’s growing strength. The 2008 financial crisis generated perceptions in Chinese political, foreign policy, and domestic circles of U.S. weakness and decline.<sup>27</sup> This could encourage Chinese leaders to underestimate U.S. resolve and initiate actions to assert its influence in the region more forcefully. As one expert stated, “Refraining from these efforts for fear of antagonizing China would send the wrong signal by effectively enabling the Chinese leadership to veto U.S. action.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, some experts contend the May 2014 oil rig incident marked a fundamental change in Chinese behavior from a “‘low profile, avoid showdowns’ approach to one that is more proactive;” actions akin to the 2014 Russian incursions into the Crimea.<sup>29</sup> That said, as described earlier, the deterrent effectiveness of Vietnam and the Philippines remains debatable, while arming either nation ignores the larger strategic environmental factors that exist.

Critics may also question why arming the Philippines, a treaty ally, should differ from U.S. efforts to equip Taiwan, Japan, or South Korea. This policy decision provides

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<sup>25</sup> Costlow, 21.

<sup>26</sup> M Taylor Fravel, “International Relations Theory and China’s Rise: Assessing China’s Potential for Territorial Expansion,” <http://taylorfravel.com/documents/research/fravel.2010.ISR.china.expansion.pdf> (accessed Dec 10, 2014), 507.

<sup>27</sup> Swaine, 2; Cronin, “Cooperation from Strength,” 8.

<sup>28</sup> Holmes, “A Competitive Turn,” 3.

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, “China’s Oil Rig Gambit.”

a starting point with China to improve the strategic relationship by undercutting one of China's greatest fears—that the United States intends to contain it. This might provide an opportunity for cooperation on other security issues in the Asia-Pacific region through a variety of assurances and confidence-building measures that seek to build a more positive and cooperative relationship. Finally, as a regional balancer, U.S. regional presence will continue to reassure allies and partners of its commitment to the region in the absence of arming partners.

## **Chapter V – Conclusion**

The issues, tensions, and history of the U.S.-Sino relationship defy easy resolution given the differing interests and the intensity of those interests on either side. Moreover, nationalism and domestic passions throughout the region will complicate any resolution. Fundamentally, the United States must seek options that deflate fears, an underlying historical cause of conflict, and this thesis presents one possible policy option. While the regional actors other than China lack large militaries, the intensity of interests involved makes conflict a real possibility. American interests and relationships in the South China Sea may yet drag the United States into a conflict as nations seek U.S. assistance and reassurance in balancing China's growing power. If the United States demurs, China may act aggressively based on a perception of American weakness, while if the United States assists partners in deterring China, such actions may "confirm" Chinese fears of containment. This situation resembles the classic Sparta and Athens dilemma, where status quo and revisionist powers respectively, could not resolve their differing interests. The resulting three-decades long armed conflict resulted in their mutual destruction.

The United States tends to view Chinese actions in the region as nefarious, while failing to appreciate its history and economic motivations. As one expert on China noted:

Washington should strive to separate as much as possible these disputes from the larger question of its evolving strategic relationship with China. Many members of the media and outside analysts make such connections on a regular basis, by viewing each American or Chinese action with regard to the disputes as an indicator of alleged U.S. containment of China, Beijing's presumed search for regional preeminence, or an effort to create exclusionary spheres of influence.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Swaine, 9.

The United States must avoid creating an anti-China atmosphere domestically or in the region that inflames the fears and rhetoric. As one author noted about the Vietnam War:

The lesson was that ‘competing for the sake of competing’ frequently results in the conclusion that the ‘game is not worth the candle.’... Washington can afford to take a relaxed approach, namely, one of off-shore balancing. Indeed, the natural playing out of ‘balance of power’ processes in the South China Sea should eventually bring about a peaceful and stable equilibrium.<sup>2</sup>

As alternatives, arms races and armed conflict generally do not produce positive results. In fact, they more often “disturb or even exacerbate regional or bilateral military balances, leading to more insecurity and instability in the region” since hostilities often do not resolve the underlying tensions and causes of conflict.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, selling Vietnam and the Philippines lethal arms only exacerbates these tensions and increases the chances of a security dilemma. Those who contend lethal arms may deter Chinese aggression ignore the additional measures—doctrine, training, logistics, command and control, and intelligence among others—needed to create a credible deterrent. In reality, of the two nations explored, only Vietnam offers the possibility of creating a credible deterrent, yet even it faces substantial obstacles: a modest economic base, and the lack of these critical enabling elements needed in modern warfare. More likely, China will respond to arms sales by enhancing its own military capabilities to counter this threat and enhance its current overmatch. This action-reaction cycle runs the risk of expanding into a true security dilemma and subsequent arms race.

Beyond these challenges, analysis has shown arming partners poses distinct disadvantages and will further complicate the U.S.-Sino strategic relationship. Foremost

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<sup>2</sup> Goldstein, 342.

<sup>3</sup> Bitzinger, 61.

among these, arming ignores the strategic environment and strategic culture that exists in China. Strong economic growth and internal stability motivates Chinese interests and actions in the South China Sea. China is less concerned about hegemonic control than it is the ability to maintain access through the region to markets and natural resources—the lifeblood of its economy. China also has legitimate security concerns associated with the defense of its territory; previous failures exposed the country to a century of exploitation by foreign powers. This period of humiliation causes China to view external powers with suspicion, or worse as trying to contain and control it.

Arming regional partners naturally plays into these fears and undermines the trust and cooperation needed to resolve other strategic issues—North Korea, Sino-Japanese tensions, Taiwan, cyber hacking, and intellectual property theft. Moreover, “concerns remain that strong motivations, existing tensions, and entrenched positions need only an accident or miscommunication to create an incident or open conflict that subjugates all of these interests.”<sup>4</sup> This is the greatest danger; that a minor incident escalates beyond the ability of senior political leaders to arrest the inflamed passions, fears, and feelings of honor, and puts China and the United States on a path to a potentially disastrous conflict.

As an alternative to this scenario, American policy leaders could leverage strategic restraint as an initial bargaining chip toward a broader resolution of the South China Sea disputes and preservation of U.S. national interests. Such a tactic seeks to break the cycle that feeds the security dilemma, and puts the onus on China to decide whether to decrease or expand regional tensions, and whether to become a responsible great power, or violate its own stated willingness to peacefully rise. China has an

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<sup>4</sup> Bouchat, 18.

extensive history of resolving territorial disputes through diplomacy without firing a shot; thus, such a resolution in the South China Sea remains entirely feasible.

Returning to the causes of World War I, as a flashpoint, the Balkans hardly seemed worth the global conflict it helped cause. Will War College students 100 years from now study the South China Sea as they explore the causes of major regional or global conflicts and conclude the same? Will they assess war was inevitable given China's rising power relative to the United States, or will they assess that policy makers missed off-ramps to deescalate tensions due to domestic pressures, perceptions of fear and prestige, or a failure to evaluate potential outcomes? While these are impossible to answer, the region has the ingredients needed for a future conflict unless all sides takes appropriate steps to deescalate tensions.

While recognition of failures after the fact is always easy, the challenge becomes recognizing potential failures in the future, or having the courage to confront them when realized. Strategic restraint on arming does not provide a panacea, but neither does deterrence. The desire to prepare for the worst case can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the United States turns this situation into a matter of prestige and honor, China will likely oblige, and the results could be catastrophic. As two China experts noted, both sides need "to exercise restraint in defensive actions that might appear threatening; to enhance transparency to dispel misunderstandings; and to reciprocate positive actions to stimulate a virtuous circle of enhanced confidence."<sup>5</sup> Only then might a strategic relationship emerge without armed conflict to permit more effective cooperation on a range of national security issues.

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<sup>5</sup> Jim Steinberg and Mike O'Hanlon, "Don't Be a Menace to South (China Sea)," *Foreign Policy* (Apr 21, 2014) <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/04/21/dont-be-a-menace-to-south-china-sea/> (accessed Dec 10, 2014).

**Appendix I**  
**Key Decisions, Actions, Tensions in the South China Sea 2006-2012**<sup>6</sup>

2006-2007: Vietnam increases offshore oil exploration in waters claimed by China.

2006: China's State Oceanographic Administration's Marine Surveillance force begins regular patrols in the South China Sea.

2007-2008: China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs issues demarches and threats against foreign oil companies investing in Vietnam.

January 2007: The Fourth Plenum of the Vietnam Communist Party's Central Committee adopts a resolution mandating the development of a national 'Maritime Strategy Towards the Year 2020.' The strategy envisions that maritime industries, especially fishing and petroleum, would account for 55 percent of GDP in 2020, up from 48 percent in 2005.

April 2007: Vietnam establishes one township and two communes in the Truong Sa (Spratly Island) District that administers the Spratly Islands.

November 2007: The Philippine legislature begins debate on an archipelagic baselines law, which includes 53 features from the Spratlys as part of the Philippine archipelago.

2008-2009: The number of Vietnamese fishing boats operating near the Paracels increases significantly. China's Bureau of Fisheries Administration detains Vietnamese fishermen operating near the Paracel Islands.

June 2008: China's 2004 joint seismic survey agreement with the Philippines and Vietnam expires and is not renewed.

Nov 2008: A task force from the Chinese PLA Navy's South Sea Fleet conducts a circumnavigation exercise in the South China Sea.

February 2009: The Philippine legislature passes an archipelagic baseline law, which included claims to some of the Spratlys. The bill is signed into law in March 2009.

May 2009: Vietnam independently and with Malaysia submit claims to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf for extended continental shelves in the South China Sea.

May 2009: The Philippines objects to China's claims to the UN.

May 2009: China's submits a map with the "nine-dashed line" to the UN Commission on Limits of the Continental Shelf.

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<sup>6</sup> Swaine, 10-12.

May 2009: China expands the duration of its annual fishing ban about 12 degrees north in the South China Sea. China links patrols by the Bureau of Fisheries Administration with its claims in the South China Sea.

November 2009: Vietnam's Foreign Ministry convenes an international academic conference on the South China Sea to start its campaign to "internationalize" the dispute.

January 2010: Vietnam assumes the rotating chairmanship of ASEAN and begins a public effort to build consensus within ASEAN on the South China Sea and to engage the major powers, especially the United States.

March 2010: The Vietnamese Prime Minister makes a public visit to one of the Vietnamese-held Spratly Islands.

March 2010: A task force from the Chinese PLA Navy's North Sea Fleet conducts training exercises in the South China Sea.

April 2010: Approximately 20 Vietnamese fishing and coast guard vessels surround a Chinese Bureau of Fisheries Administration patrol vessel.

July 2010: The PLAN conducts an exercise held in the northern portion of the South China Sea with vessels from each of the three fleets in the Chinese navy.

November 2010: Vietnam's Foreign Ministry convenes a second international academic conference on the South China Sea.

November 2010: The PLAN's South Sea Fleet conducts an amphibious assault exercise in the northern part of the South China Sea.

February 2011: The Philippines begins a seismic survey in the waters near Reed Bank.

March 2011: Chinese MSF boats maneuver aggressively around Philippine seismic survey vessel operating at Reed Bank.

March 2011: Vietnam begins seismic surveys in waters claimed by China.

April 2011: The Philippines submits a *note verbale* to the UN contesting in detail China's claims to territorial sovereignty and maritime jurisdiction.

May 2011: A Chinese MSF vessel severs the towed cable of a Vietnamese seismic survey boat off the coast of central Vietnam in waters China claims.

June 2011: A Chinese fishing boat becomes entangled in the towed cable of a Vietnamese seismic survey vessel.

June 2011: Vietnam holds a live-fire naval exercise in the South China Sea.



June 2011: Five legislators from the Philippines make high profile visit to Thitu Island held by the Philippines in the Spratly Islands.

June 2011: Philippines unveils new plan to resolve disputes in the South China, known as a Zone of Peace, Freedom, Friendship and Cooperation (ZoPFFC), that would limit claims to maritime jurisdiction from contested islands.

June 2011: Calls grow in the Philippines for inclusion of contested land features in the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States.

June 2011: The Philippines names the South China Sea as the West Philippine Sea.

November 2011: Vietnam's Foreign Ministry hosts a third international academic conference on the South China Sea.

November 2011: Philippines push its ZoPFFC concept at the East Asian Summit

February 2012: The Philippine pushes for ASEAN to negotiate a code of conduct before entering into any talks with China

March 2012: The Philippines and Vietnam reach an agreement to hold joint patrols in a portion of the Spratly Island.

April 2012: The Philippines moves to arrest Chinese fishermen in Scarborough. China dispatches MSF and Fisheries Administration vessels to the shoal and quarantines fruit imports from the Philippines.

June 2012: Vietnam begins to use advanced Su-27 fighter aircraft to patrol the skies over the South China Sea.

June 2012: Vietnam's National Legislature passes a Maritime Law that reiterates its claims to sovereignty over the Paracel and Spratly Islands.

June 2012: China's State Council upgrades the administrative status of the Paracels and Spratlys from county to prefectural-level city named Sansha.

June 2012: CNOOC invites bids for exploration blocks located within Vietnam's EEZ.

June 2012: China's Ministry of Defense announces that China has already established a "combat-ready" patrol system in the South China Sea.

June 2012: Four Chinese MSF ships conduct patrol in the Spratlys

July 2012: A large Chinese fishing fleet conducts a high profile trip to the Spratly Islands

July 2012: The Sansha military garrison is established in Sansha city

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### **Vita**

Lieutenant Colonel David Dengler received his commission in 1997 after graduating from the U.S. Air Force Academy. Since then, he has served as an intelligence officer at the squadron, intelligence agency, Joint Staff and combatant command levels, and commanded Airmen at the Squadron level. These assignments included work with airborne and national ISR platforms, planning for future ISR capabilities, and support to contingency operations and planning. During his most recent assignment, he served as a Squadron Commander at Beale AFB, California for an ISR unit supporting combat missions in Afghanistan. He participated in Operations Southern Watch, Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom. Lt Col Dengler graduated from the USAF Weapons School and the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College. He holds Masters Degrees in U.S. Military History and Military Arts and Science and was recently selected for promotion to Colonel. He has a wife and three children.